

TO LIGHTEN PARENTING'S DARK SIDE

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During our lifetimes we have worked closely with thousands of parents—as rabbi, teacher, community organizer, and family therapist. Virtually all of those parents treasured the lives of their children above all else in their own lives. Given half a chance, they could talk endlessly with pride and love about their children's qualities and accomplishments.

Yet for many there was, pardon the expression, a dark side to their parenthood. At times their children provoked them to the breaking point, straining their knowledge, patience, energy, and spirit. These parents were forced to acknowledge the wrongdoing of their children. Although their love for them was rarely diminished, they were compelled to admit, sometimes publicly, that their children were lying, stealing, addicted to drugs, sexually predatory, bullying and, occasionally, much worse.

That gets us to the heart of what we want to write about here: how to lighten the dark side of parenting, reducing the pain of parenting children who have lost their way. There is more than one kind of pain involved in these situations, as many of us know from experience, both as parents and children. First, of course, there is the pain we feel when those we love, especially our children, are suffering from their mistakes. Then there's the pain we feel because we hold ourselves responsible in some measure for those mistakes. Finally, there is the pain we feel from the conviction that our children's future may be wasted, ruined by a foolish mistake—theirs or ours.

We're not sure there's any remedy for the pain we feel when we see our children in pain, except of course to do what we can on the spot to help them.

But what about the pain associated with our responsibility and feelings of guilt in these matters?

In Genesis 37:1 we read that Jacob has settled down to a comfortable existence in Canaan. His youngest son, Joseph, brings to him an “evil report” about his brothers. (Genesis 37:2) The text describes Joseph as a “youth” (*na'ar*)—he was 17, the gematria (Hebrew numerology) for which is 320, equal to that of the Hebrew word *shoteh*, “fool”; and the Baal Haturim (Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, 1270-1343) teaches that, “This is intimated by the verse . . . and one who utters slander is a fool. (Proverbs 10:18)”

Did Jacob then blame himself when he received the report from his older sons that a wild animal had killed Joseph? We don't have any reason to think so: the Torah tells us only that, “he mourned for his son many days.” (Genesis 37:34) Neither

the text nor the commentators give any hint that he was guilt-ridden, although he proclaimed that he would go to his grave mourning his son. (Genesis 37:35) Nonetheless, Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar (1696-1744) relates that, “Jacob wanted to enjoy peace and quiet in the world; as a result he suffered the upsetting experience with Joseph. . . .”

Why might we imagine that, on balance, Jacob did not feel guilty about Joseph's fate?

Possibly because he genuinely believed, correctly or not, that he had done everything possible as a parent to enable Joseph to make sound moral choices and, beyond that, the outcome was not in his power. Possibly Jacob recognized both the extent and the limitations of his own responsibility for his children.

Not only had Jacob done virtually all that a responsible, loving parent might do *personally* to ensure his child's well-being, he recognized that the *community* has a significant role to play in the parenting of children, that successful parenting requires participation by members of the community in its institutions that support healthy child-rearing, which he was invested in creating and sustaining. In contrast, much of contemporary parenting has become a highly privatized enterprise, one in which the community, the extended family, and siblings are disenfranchised in favor of a monopoly by parents whose work-demands leave little time, energy, or spirit for rearing children.

Parental guilt is undoubtedly misplaced and far less likely when one has personally and communally done everything possible in the way of a loving and responsible parent.

Incidentally, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) tells us that although Jacob mourned Joseph for 22 years, until they were reunited in Egypt, he never accepted his son's death—which is why he refused to be consoled and comforted by his other children. (Genesis 37:35)

But what of the pain we feel as parents when we imagine that a foolish mistake may ruin our child's future?

We may be inconsolable, as Jacob was, because of the events of the moment that foreshadow disaster for our children. Yet how can we ever really know at the outset whether our children are to play some larger part in God's plan, the full scope of which is beyond our imagination? The alternative is to step back and acknowledge the greater possibilities in Divine Providence.

Rabbi Moshe recalls how in his own life, when he quit high school in the 11th grade to join the Air Force, his parents were inconsolable. They had

expected with utter certainty that he would go to college, and they were disconsolate from their newly acquired conviction that he would be consigned to live the rest of his life without even a high school diploma. It was beyond both their faith and imagination that he would graduate from college, earn a master's degree and a doctorate, be ordained as a rabbi, and spend much of his life working for the Jewish people—as it was then equally beyond Moshe's imagination.

The turning point for his father, when he could begin to imagine a greater possibility, came after Moshe's college graduation ceremony. His father wanted to see the campus office he occupied as student body president. When his father saw the massive desk, paneled walls, and plush carpeting, he said quietly, "I guess I can't ask you to take out the garbage anymore." He finally understood that there were more potentialities for his child's life than what he could imagine and control.

We want to suggest here that some of the pain parents feel about the missteps of their children is avoidable or at least reducible. Some of that pain is implicitly based on the arrogant fiction that our own vision and control of our children's lives approximate Divine Providence, that their lives are entirely within our control and have no more potential than what we can afford them.

In *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Vayeshev we have what initially seems like little more than a

variation on the classic theme of sibling rivalry. Rabbi Nahum Sarna, the author of the Jewish Publication Society commentary on Genesis, refers to it, however, as the beginning of a "chain of events that leads to the descent to Egypt . . . the prelude to the drama of repression and redemption . . .," which itself is the overture to the events at Mount Sinai and the transformation of a "mixed multitude" into the Children of Israel, the Jewish people.

As *Akeidat Yitzchak* (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) says: "The chain of events in which the jealousy of Joseph's brothers played a prominent part"—and we would add, Joseph's gossip about them to his father—"ultimately proves to have become the instrument of God's design."

The idea of Divine Providence, that God—the Creator who implants and nurtures goodness in the world—manages human history, requires that we recognize the limitations of our own vision and control. That doesn't relieve us of responsibility to do everything within our power to ensure the well being of our children, including investing in community and recognizing its share of responsibility. But it may well reduce the pain we suffer.

We would do better to recognize and allow ourselves to be awed by Divine Providence. That is, to acknowledge its inherent potential to transform our sorrow and despair into joy and hope, in our own lives and those of our children.

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